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REDUCE WOODLAND GRAZING BY INCREASING PASTURES

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Within the last few months several measures of land use have been initiated which offer distinct opportunities to relieve extensive areas of farm woods in the Central States from further degradation through grazing of livestock. The importance of the farm woods to this region and the serious damage caused by pasturing make it necessary for forestry agencies and woodland owners to take full advantage of these opportunities.

The crop reduction program of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration will apparently result in more lands used for forage and pasture. Various erosion control projects now carried on by several public agencies require forest or grass cover for steep slopes and erosible soils. The acquisition of marginal areas by the Surplus Relief Corporation may lead in many instances to similar management of these lands. The demonstration projects of the Soil Erosion Service in Ohio, Illinois, and elsewhere, are promoting improved agricultural practices which include contour farming, erosion control, and a considerable increase in forage and grass on the steeper slopes. Many progressive farmers may be expected to adopt these improved practices, with the result that extensive areas which cannot be farmed conservatively in corn or similar crops will be put into grass. All of these measures should tend to relieve the present shortage of pastures in the Corn Belt, and should gradually eliminate the necessity for pasturing livestock in the farm woods, which practice has been a major factor in reducing them to their present state of deterioration. The general adoption of the measures of the Lumber Code to sustain and improve forest production should also tend to discourage woodland grazing in the Central States.

This combination of circumstances is called to the attention of forestry, conservation, and agricultural agencies as well as to owners of farm woods, because there appear to be opportunities for checking much of the serious deterioration that has been taking place, and for constructive work in the productive management of a valuable forest asset.

The importance of the farm woods in any well-balanced agricultural or land-use program is becoming widely appreciated. The economic, biotic, aesthetic, and sociologic values gained by retaining certain portions of the land in timber are being recognized as essential to the welfare of any community. Unfortunately, in the face of this increasing importance of farm woods, and the many opportunities they present for profitable forest management, the percentage of woodlands on farms has been decreasing steadily. In many of the better agricultural areas farm woods are approaching extinction.

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Moreover, most of the woodlands remaining in the Corn Belt are so badly understocked, overmature and decadent that they are becoming of little value for timber production or for any other use as forested lands. Tree regeneration is prevented by the browsing and trampling of livestock, young growth is destroyed, the moisture-conserving and fertility-building leaf litter disappears, the soil becomes compacted, and tree growth declines. A woods pasture is a poor pasture and a poor woods.

Cooperative studies by the Central States Forest Experiment Station and the Purdue Agricultural Experiment Station have shown conclusively that the wide-spread practice of pasturing has been chiefly responsible for the decline in productivity and area of the farm woods. Most farmers fully appreciate that a woods pasture is greatly inferior to a good open pasture, but because of the fact that practically every tillable acre in some sections has been used for corn or forage crops, the woodlands have constituted the only pasture available, and naturally have been thoroughly utilized even at the cost of forest devastation. Over-grazing has not only seriously curtailed the production of timber products, but also has decreased or destroyed the value of many farm woodlands for erosion control, for conservation of soil moisture and underground water, for food and shelter of game and insectivorous bird life, and for wind breaks or shelter belts. If we could calculate accurately the monetary value of the services and benefits which accrue to humans from forested lands, and which have been so extravagantly wasted in this region, we would find that the Corn Belt farmers have paid, and will continue to pay, a tremendous price for their woods forage.

The saving of the farm woods from ultimate destruction and restoring them to productivity has been one of the principal objectives of all public forestry organizations in the Central States; but the total results from all this effort have not been encouraging. In spite of much educational and extension work, many demonstrations of proper woodland management, and even special tax legislation in some states, the practice of grazing the farm woods has been very generally continued. In some instances the farmers have been ignorant of or indifferent to the situation; in others it has been a matter of economic necessity. These same factors have contributed directly to other land abuses, for which various remedies described in the beginning of this paper, are being tried. Every forestry and conservation agency should welcome and assist the movement leading toward better farming methods, increased areas in grass, and economic land use, for it provides an opportunity for saving and restoring the farm woods.